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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2018  
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [OFDP](#) [KLIG](#) [VE](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: "SPYING" CHARGES FEED EVO'S PROPAGANDA

REF: LA PAZ 218

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Fulbright student Alex van Schaick reported to the Bolivian Foreign Ministry February 7 that he had been asked by Post's Assistant Regional Security Officer to report contacts with Venezuelan and Cuban nationals to the Embassy. Van Schaick told an ABC News.com stringer in La Paz the same story, characterizing the alleged request as "spying" on foreign nationals, an act he felt the "Bolivian people have a right to know" about. Bolivian President Evo Morales used the incident to assert a new U.S. "attack" on Bolivia, following at least eight other allegations of U.S. conspiracy against his government. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and other Bolivian officials have piled on with accusations of U.S. infringement on Bolivian sovereignty. Government Minister Alfredo Rada has threatened an investigation and formal espionage charges against the ARSO and anyone connected to the briefing. ARSO alleges contact reporting was not a part of the Fulbrighter's briefing and the four other Fulbrighters in Bolivia have either confirmed it was not part of their briefings or declined to speak to the press. Despite continuous efforts of the Embassy to counter false perceptions and settle the issue diplomatically, the Bolivian government continued to rehash it daily via the media.

12. (C) The Ambassador finally met February 13 with Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca and Government Minister Rada to address the incident (septel). Following the meeting, Choquehuanca stated publicly that the Bolivian government accepted the Ambassador's explanation of the incident and Rada announced that Cooper would not be returning to Bolivia. Despite this apparent closure to this case, post will monitor closely whether the government shifts direction toward Fulbrighters and Peace Corps volunteers, putting their security at risk. But, government officials have so far refrained from blaming anyone outside Embassy walls. End Summary.

Schaick's Story

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13. (U) A February 8 ABC News.com report cited Fulbright student Alex van Schaick allegations the U.S. Embassy asked him to report back to the Embassy on Venezuelan and Cuban citizens residing in Bolivia. Van Schaick told ABC News.com Bolivian stringer Jean Friedman-Rudovsky that he was shocked when ARSO Vincent Cooper asked him to "basically spy" on Venezuelans and Cubans while conducting research in Bolivia during a routine November 5 security briefing at the Embassy. "He asked me that if I should encounter Venezuelans or Cubans while in the field ... that I should report to the embassy."

#### Fulbright Scholar Basks in Media Spotlight

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14. (SBU) Responding to questions of whether he should have approached the Embassy with his concerns instead of waiting three months and reporting the incident to Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca February 7, Van Schaick told ABC News.com he initially didn't "respond because I was in shock," and that he "didn't want to voice my concern with that statement to him (Cooper)." He added he didn't see the point reporting the incident to the Embassy because Peace Corps official Doreen Salazar had complained about a similar briefing allegedly including instructions to help the embassy "keep tabs" on Cubans to Peace Corps volunteers July 29 without result (the article cites an e-mail Salazar allegedly sent to the Embassy). "Why would it be any different this time?"

15. (C) Van Schaick, who has been studying indigenous land issues in the Eastern state of Santa Cruz since October, has initiated contact with the press and given several follow-on interviews to U.S. and Bolivian press. He claimed feeling compelled to bring the incident to light because "the Bolivian people have a right to know." In contrast to Van Schaick's version of events, three of the other four Fulbrighters in country denied contact reporting was part of their security briefing in a follow-on ABC News.com story, with the other Fulbrighter refusing to talk to the press. Interestingly, the Foreign Minister told the Ambassador that it was at the behest of the ABC News.com stringer that he met with Van Schaick.

#### Evo Declares Cooper Persona-non-desirable; Chavez Piles On

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16. (C) Bolivian President Evo Morales declared Cooper a "non-desirable person" February 11, during a speech to military officers. "This man has not only violated the rights of (those he instructed), but has also violated, offended, and attacked our nation." Morales added Cooper was "not wanted here." Morales repeated van Schaick's allegation that he was asked to "spy," characterized the incident as proof of U.S. "espionage attempts," and used it to underline the military's responsibility to protect Bolivia from enemies "from within and without." Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez actually preempted Morales by a day, declaring February 10 that "the U.S. had to admit to espionage." Foreign Minister Choquehuanca chimed in over the weekend, saying any intelligence use of students or volunteers would constitute a "grave threat to Bolivian's sovereignty."

#### Government Accepts U.S. Explanation; Cooper Will Not Return

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17. (U) Following the Ambassador's three-plus-hour meeting with Foreign Minister Choquehuanca and Government Minister Rada February 13, the FM declared to the press that the government "accepts the Ambassador's explanations. We want to overcome this problem." Government Minister Rada then announced Cooper would not be returning to Bolivia. The Ambassador echoed the FM's sentiment that we want to overcome this incident, expressed appreciation for the government's accepting our explanation, and said the U.S. wants to improve relations. Ambassador Goldberg had publicly assured Bolivians February 12 that he "absolutely respects the sovereignty and dignity of Bolivia." The Ambassador added "at no time did U.S. Embassy personnel ask any Peace Corps

volunteers or Fulbright scholars to engage in intelligence activities," even if incorrect or inappropriate information was given in a routine security briefing.

#### The Truth, and Other Things Left Unsaid

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¶18. (U) Embassy La Paz issued a statement the same day the ABC News.com story broke explaining the Embassy did not ask Peace Corps or Fulbrighters to engage in intelligence activities. Post Information Officer Eric Watnik attempted to further clarify the incident February 11, stating that ARSO Cooper mistakenly started to give Peace Corps volunteers the security briefing intended for Embassy employees in July. This briefing requires Embassy employees to report suspicious activities, but does not apply to Peace Corps volunteers. In the July case, Watnik added, the security officer was immediately corrected by Peace Corps Deputy Director Doreen Salazar during the briefing and steps were taken to correct the briefing. Watnik said there was no way to confirm the content of van Schaick's one-on-one November interview with ARSO Cooper. "We are disappointed that the Fulbright scholar involved did not voice his concerns to other Embassy officers or to a member of the Fulbright Commission."

¶19. (C) Although ABC News.com reports Salazar confirmed contact reporting was mentioned during the July briefing, it also quotes her as saying the Embassy agreed with her complaint and agreed to take action to correct the briefing. Recent media reports have noted Salazar is not commenting further. Salazar first spoke to the press without post's authorization. Salazar admits she sent an e-mail concerning the July briefing to the Embassy, but contends she did not forward the e-mail to Van Schaick and does not know how he became aware of it. It is unknown how Van Schaick became aware of the Peace Corps incident and subsequent e-mail.

#### Rada's Posse Convokes and Charges

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¶10. (C) Minister of Government Alfredo Rada said February 10 he did not believe the U.S. explanation of the incident. "It's not as simple as saying this was a mistake." Rada demanded explanations and said he would ask Ambassador Goldberg to explain the situation. On February 12 Rada's ministry denounced Cooper's acts as crimes in violation of Bolivian penal code article 115 (revelations of state secrets) and 111 (espionage) and announced charges would be

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forthcoming. Although Vice Minister of Interior and Police Ruben Gamarra conceded Cooper is "the only person that we have identified," he said an investigation would attempt to identify "members of the same Embassy" who authored, accompliced, or covered up the alleged crimes. On February 13 Rada identified Cooper as an subordinate to Embassy Military Group Commander James Campbell, who he misidentified as the Embassy's "chief of security." Rada described a "chain" of offenses against Bolivian sovereignty. (Comment: Rada was apparently trying to link the current "scandal" with a previous charge of U.S. interference involving Campbell. This is not the first time Rada has identified Campbell as security chief. End Comment).

Comment

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¶11. (C) There have been at least eight previous charges of U.S. espionage or conspiracy against the Bolivian government in the last year (a fact local daily La Prensa reported, noting there has been no evidence to back past allegations). These latest charges follow the now familiar format of publicly accusing the Embassy of subversion, demanding an explanation from the Ambassador, and forming an investigation to get to the truth. The reality is that the Bolivian government is interested in exploiting these situations and uses them to distract Bolivians from the problems facing them and portray the United States as the culprit. (Note: During

the last round of charges over U.S. spying in late January, the Vice President point blank told the Ambassador neither he nor Morales believed those accusations, but would not state that publicly - reftel. End Note.) Not easily taken off script, government officials have demanded explanations from the Embassy and threatened to convoke the Ambassador on a daily basis since the charges surfaced, despite the fact that the Embassy released a statement the same day the allegations emerged and that the Ambassador immediately called the FM to discuss the issue, a call that was not returned. Also per the script, the latest round of statements were done via the press. Only when the Ambassador requested the meeting with the Foreign Minister, was he "convoked."

¶12. (C) Comment Continued. The Bolivian government has so far refrained from spreading their paranoia beyond its accusations against the Embassy, though Choquehuanca's statements came dangerously close. We will endeavor to minimize the damage done by this incident, but the task becomes ever more difficult when the Fulbrighter and others, including the media, are willingly fueling the Morales administration's accusations of espionage. What makes this round different is these charges are partially based on a real event (that should not have occurred), not made up from whole cloth, and that they are being made by an American citizen. Also, a respectable U.S. media outlet -- ABC News.com -- has used a story pushed by a stringer that has a political agenda as much as a new story behind it. End Comment.  
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